

Musical Work in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project

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Kristen Keymont

Classical Music, Washington and Massachusetts

Instructor, Voice and Piano

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Interviewers: Maria Price

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MARIA PRICE 00: 00:15

Okay, so this is Thursday, April 29, 2021. The time is 1:43pm Pacific Time. And I am Maria Price here in Seattle, Washington. I'm speaking with Kristen Keymont. And Kristen, can you tell us where you are right now?

KRISTEN KEYMONT 00:00:37

So, I am currently in Ipswich, Massachusetts. It's a little bit outside of Boston on the North Shore.

MARIA 00:00:45

Great. And this is the Musical Work in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project. So Kristin, I'm going to start just with some questions, some demographic questions. And then we'll go into more music and COVID-related questions after that. So, could you first spell your first and last name for us?

KRISTEN 00:01:10

It's K-R-I-S-T-E-N. And then Keymont K-E-Y-M-O-N-T.

MARIA 00: 01:17

Thank you. And what is your date of birth?

KRISTEN 00:01:21

July 29, 1991.

MARIA 00:01:24

And where were you born?

KRISTEN 00:01:26

Framingham, Massachusetts (*laugh*).

MARIA 00:01:29

And what's your gender identity and pronouns?

KRISTEN 00:01:33

She/her. CIS female.

MARIA 00:01:37

And what race or ethnicity do you identify with?

KRISTEN 00:01:40

Caucasian. White.

MARIA 00:01:43

How important is your racial/ethnic background to you?

KRISTEN 00:01:48

Not very? I guess. I don't really identify with a white identity. I feel like that's a spooky thing to even just say out loud, right now, anyway. But, yea, I don't have any traditional cultural ties to anywhere in Europe or anything like that. Other than knowing that my dad was Lithuanian, but that's really about it. (*laugh*) So, not terribly part of my daily life, other than trying to reflect on the privilege that comes with having white skin. But other than that, nothing really.

MARIA 00:02:26

And where do you live now?

KRISTEN 00:02:29

Ipswich Massachusetts.

MARIA 00: 02:32

So, before we get into more of these questions, maybe do you want to say how we know each other?

KRISTEN 00:02:41

So, Maria, and I went to UMass Lowell [University of Massachusetts Lowell] together (*laugh*) for undergrad. And then—funnily enough, I had—I had just moved back from Washington, where I was living in Tacoma, Washington for about five years. And then Maria moved to Seattle, so then we reunited. More recently, because we were at UMass, what feels like an eternity ago now, right? So I graduated [in] 2013 you graduated a year before, right? 2012? Yeah. So it had been a while, but I'm glad it happened (*laugh*).

MARIA 00:03:19

And you're in Massachusetts now. But during when COVID first became a thing, when we had this pandemic and lockdown, you were living in Tacoma. So, can you give a little bit of an elevator pitch? What were you doing either music related or non-music related for work? Let's say in 2019 before COVID was in the US.

KRISTEN 00:03:47

So, I make my living by being a voice and piano teacher, primarily. So at the time, before COVID all went down, I worked for Annie Wright Schools [Private school: Pre, K - 12] in Tacoma, as well as this music academy (*laugh*) called Cappella Music Academy. Lots of things to say about them. (*laugh*) But we'll leave that for another interview. But, I work as a voice and piano teacher. I had about—I think before COVID kind of went down, I was up to — 45 students between the two schools, and then I also was a regular performer with Symphony Tacoma Voices [chorus] as well as Tacoma Opera. And, I had just done a recital actually in November 2019. So, I had just done a stand-a-lone recital with a colleague of mine. And, we celebrated women composers. It was really great actually. So I was—I was active, right when this all went down, all day, every day, music.

MARIA 00:04:45

And, then thinking back to let's say— late February, early March 2020, when things, especially in Washington state, started to really close down; Can you walk me through what you remember happening? What your initial feelings and reactions were?

KRISTEN 00:05:09

Yeah actually, I mean _now that I think about it, so prior to all of this as an opera singer, as a soprano, right, it's really competitive for that particular voice type— specifically, but I had kind of been working my way up to side roles and potentially getting a main role, and working my way towards solos with orchestras, rather than just being in the choir. Right before everything shut down, I had actually just gotten my first main role, my biggest contract with Tacoma Opera. Again, it was—it was like a side main role, but it was named, right? And that's kind of the distinction in—in opera and musical theater. Are you part of the ensemble? Or do you get a name for your character? And I was supposed to play Fleta [FLEE-Taa] or Fleta [FLEH-Taa], people say it differently, in Iolanthe which is Gilbert and Sullivan [Dramatist and Composer Mid 19th Century]. And yeah, I was super excited about it, who doesn't want to be a fairy on stage? I was hyped, they were gonna let me keep my pink hair. And that never happened. So anyway, I was — just had gotten that. And then again, I had gotten my first solo singing with Symphony Tacoma Voices in a commissioned work that also didn't get to be premiered for that poor composer I forget—what was it called? No, The Bleeding Pines was something else we did. I forget the title at this point. But it was only—it was like a four or five bar solo. But again, it was—it was that first—and I wasn't getting paid for it or anything. But again, it was that moment where like, okay, this is a solo voice and an orchestra. So, I was really excited about that. But, so, that week, when it all kind of went down, we were still having rehearsals with Symphony Tacoma. We were literally just about to start rehearsals for Iolanthe with Tacoma Opera, I think they had—they were scheduled to start next week. And, then that week of St. Paddy's Day is when everything kind of shuts down; especially particularly singing, of course, is what is unfortunately, something that spreads COVID very easily. And, we know that locally in Washington, too. And I remember we found out about the Skagit Valley Chorale, and what happened there. There's a CDC study on it now, but there was a super spreading event that made national news and two thirds of that choir got infected. And, I think two of them died. And it was just very surreal, because— again, I had been rehearsing with our Symphony chorus. And, that could have been us, you know, like, we were still rehearsing that week, too. So, it was a very kind of heavy realization in the choir, like how lucky we were that it didn't happen to us. And then of course, also, I mean, I'm even getting emotional thinking about it. But of course— the tragedy of what happened to the people it did happen to, because you never expect to go into choir rehearsal, and then—dying, right? That is—it's pretty crazy. I keep saying to my students— it's pretty cool that this universe has made singing, which is one of the most beautiful things in the universe, one of the most dangerous things in the universe right now. So, anyway, that's kind of what was going on when it all went down. I had come off this—I was getting there. I got off this high of like, oh, I got a role, I got a solo, it's happening, and everything's gonna be great. And then (*mouth popping sound*) it all just completely shut off. So really kind of a big emotional roller coaster there for sure.

MARIA 00:08:34

And, that incident in Skagit—Skagit Valley that you mentioned, that was just one person who had COVID right?

KRISTEN 00:08:44

Yes, that they know of. One person didn't realize they were infected, and they went to choir rehearsal, like any of us would. And yeah, the— I think it was sixty out of eighty people, something like that. Forty out of sixty, those kinds of numbers that got infected, and two of them passed away. And of course, the demographics of Symphony choruses tend to lean older, but that doesn't take away from the tragedy or the risk that it would present to younger singers, too. So, yeah.

MARIA 00:09:18

So, as this is happening, as rehearsals are canceled, as things are closing— did you experience any financial disruptions? Can you talk a little bit about that?

KRISTEN 00:09:30

Yeah. Well, luckily, because I'm—I shouldn't say—I'm primarily a teacher. But I make my living mostly from teaching and that—although we had to have the quick transition to online and that was kind of chaotic, I didn't lose that many students honestly. And if anything, actually, as we get further in this conversation, I'm sure we'll discuss, I've actually gained some students and kind of gained some different demographics that maybe wouldn't have been possible if we continued live instruction. But— Yeah, financially I did okay, but I did lose. Like I said, I got my largest contract with Tacoma Opera. And you know, I did lose \$600 from not getting to do that as well as just the sting of it in general. I will say Tacoma Opera did—about a month or two after this all went down, they set up an Artists Relief Fund, and sent us a little something. Again, was it the same? No, but they set up a fund and they distributed funds to people who missed out on that opportunity. Also, there was a Seattle area musicians relief fund that I also got to take advantage of. I'm not sure if that's what they called it, but I saw it posted on one of the Facebook forums. Then you had to reach—fill out a Google form and then send an email and then they sent me— kind of just an honor system, how much did you lose? I sent a copy of that contract. It was [asked} how much did you lose? And then how much—What's the minimum you would need to get by, so I kind of just said a number and they sent it over. So that was really helpful. Other than just the unpredictability of online instruction and everything going forward, I didn't lose too, too much money, because I don't make a lot of my money performing because that is the classical singing world, (*laugh*) unfortunately.

MARIA 00:11:27

And, you had also mentioned these experiences in a choir, in opera. Can you talk a little bit about how vocalists are affected by COVID as opposed to maybe different kinds of instrumentalists: string players or brass players or wind players?

KRISTEN 00:11:51

Yeah, so vocalists are kind of their own separate category, right?, when it comes to COVID and spreading disease, because we are—I mean, we can't say we're all super spreaders. But, I think we're more likely to be super spreaders. [It's] just the nature of the instrument and how we're constantly exhaling that steady stream (*laugh*) of air. And the particles—the mucosal—these aerosols that everyone talks about, they come off the vocal folds. That's the mucus and the stuff that's getting vibrated while you're singing. That's why we're so efficient at spreading disease when we sing because again, it's literally coming from the source. Whereas, when we're speaking, it's a little bit more sporadic, or an offhand cough or sneeze, of course, that's like a burst. But singing is literally constantly breathing. And together, we all inhale together, and we all exhale together. So it just—it fills the room with aerosols, in a way that brass instruments and wind instruments don't. I mean, they do, but to a lesser extent, because it goes through another physical instrument outside the body. Whereas [for] us, it gets emitted straight from our face (*laugh*). So lucky us. Yeah, it's a special risk to singers

healthwise—well, again—to anybody, obviously. Wind players need their lungs too obviously, but [for] singing, our body is our instrument. So, it's really important that we keep our instrument in working order, as much as you wouldn't just bend your trumpet in half (*laugh*) or just bash it against the wall, right? You want to be careful to it. So, I think singers in particular are really sensitive to changes in their instrument, because we have to be, we have to be able to perceive those micro— differences in our instrument, because our instrument is micro size. Our vocal folds are only about the size—for females, they're about the same width as our pinky finger, they're teeny tiny. We're talking about millimeters that we're working with. So any kind of inflammation or mucus or build up of anything is obviously not an advantage to singing. And then of course, [there's] the whole issue of lung damage and the decreased capacity to breathe. And the decreased—I imagine the fatigue would decrease your awareness with your body. It just really—I've heard of some colleagues, no one I know personally, but friends of friends who know people who have had COVID as singers, and they—it's a long rehabilitation process to get back to the level that they were before COVID. And unfortunately, some still haven't. If you have long COVID there's long term implications for that. And I mean, I was—I was horrified and terrified for a really long time about it. Yeah, so singing I think is a special case, like I said earlier, where now something that's so human and so emotional and so beautiful, has been turned into this, like, do not do that in public, you will spread a disease and it's just such an interesting dichotomy between those two things.

MARIA 00:15:05

And—You're vaccinated now, right?

KRISTEN 00:15:07

Yes, yes. I have had both vaccines.

MARIA 00:15:09

So, let's think back to before you were vaccinated, maybe even before vaccines were as widely accessible. Can you talk a little bit about your reaction to COVID and the precautions that you took with the pandemic?

KRISTEN 00:15:31

(*laugh*) Okay, well, (*laugh*) I am probably tier one paranoid when it comes to these kinds of things. Again, I think singers in general are kind of—there's all those—since this is a music interview, right? —there's all those singer memes, with the scarves and the tea and the cough drops and that's totally true. We're all like that. I actually literally—I don't have it here right now, but I literally bought a little desk humidifier, so I could breathe in steam (*laugh*). They sell those— they sell little personal steamers for singers. Anyway, we're nuts. So that[s] already established--and I have my own kind of hypochondriac tendencies to be honest. And COVID, to be quite frank, was kind of my own personal nightmare of things that could go wrong in my body because of its high rate of blood clots and people just dropping dead from that. My father died of a blood clot when I was fifteen. So that was very clear trauma. This is spooky and I've always been afraid of blood clots. So this disease coming out not only has the potential to snatch my singing voice like Ursula (*laugh*), and then take—give me lung damage—anything that affects my voice is my worst nightmare anyway. On top of that, the risk for blood clots and the reminder of— our mortality; How you can be here one second and gone the next. So yeah, this was pretty much my own—it's like this disease was engineered to attack me specifically. And, I know it wasn't but (*laugh*) yeah. So, I was really—I—as soon as everything happened, I researched a lot. I keep up on the studies. Luckily, we have Dr. Geoffrey Boers at the University of Washington, and that's actually the Symphony Tacoma choir director. We were—he was really on top of the science. We were all on top of the science. Anyone in the professional voice field who wants to protect their voice and their students' voices, I think has to be. So, I always mask. I still mask even though I am vaccinated. I bought a[n] antiviral mask, I actually bought three antiviral masks (*laugh*). I picked up a sanitizing habit that I never had before. I hated hand sanitizer for a really long time. Honestly, I was always like, no, you're killing the good bacteria. You want to keep that on your hands. I never—I hated it. I hate that it dries it [the skin] out. But now if I go into

a store, I always sanitize before and after. [I'm] kind of— trying to get rid of that habit a little bit more because it got pretty bad at some point where it was like, every time I touched something—it got a little compulsive, honestly. But yeah, it— just kind of, I— wanted to eliminate any and all risks in my power. And again, I think that's maybe just my own anxiety. But, I don't know, not a lot of people took it as extreme as I did from my own observations. But, because it's so central, it's such a huge glaring risk to what I do, I just decided I am not going to take any risks if I—if I can avoid it. So, I luckily moved all my students online. I—Well, I shouldn't say all. At first during the summer in Washington, I did do some outdoor lessons. I bought a big twenty foot tent, like one of those temporary ones you're not supposed to keep up very long. She made it about three and a half weeks (*laugh*), maybe a little longer. And then that windstorm this summer took her out, [it] mangled this tent. But yeah, so I had a twenty foot long outdoor tent and I would stand on one side, I literally put a fan in between us even though it was outside so that it would all be going that way. I had a student stand on the other side without a mask. I would—I think I would usually—well, when it was outside I didn't. And then, when it started getting rainy again, or if it was raining, I put them in the garage and did kind of the same thing. I was inside, they were basically outside with the car door open, the side door open. I had an air purifier with a UVC sanitizer. (*laugh*) I had a fan. I—again, I took it—I took it really far because I couldn't live with the idea like God forbid I get it, but God forbid one of my students gets it. That is—I think it's really crazy that some teachers are risking the lives of their pupils. I think that's our number one responsibility as educators is to protect our students. So I just—I don't know, I think it's insane that some people are doing maskless lessons still to this day. Yeah, I did—I did all those things and then when it became just kind of too much of a hassle to do the garage. It started getting cold and windier too and then it was like, yeah, you were kind of inside but like you're standing next to this pouring, cold, windy rain and my piano students wore those little fingerless gloves because there was no heat in the garage, even though I put a little space heater, but that's not enough, right? So, after that I just moved everybody online. And I've been online ever since, just zooming away (*laugh*). That's kind of a summary of all the crazy things I did. Oh, I stopped going to the grocery store, I stopped going to stores in general, I did grocery pickup. I remained quite isolated, honestly, which I don't know if that was the best idea for my mental health. But again, I was just so honed in on, like, eliminating all risks until this is over, or until I'm vaccinated, which again, finally—I've used up for sure, I will say, but not by much. Well, yeah, I'm better, I'm a little better.

MARIA 00:21:02

And, do you think—talking about these precautions that you took, do you think maybe those would have changed if your primary instrument was not voice? Like, let's say, if you were a pianist, or a percussionist or a violinist, and you could wear a mask the whole time, or if it wouldn't affect your physical instrument as much, do you think that would have changed? Or is it more like you said, these hypochondriac tendencies?

KRISTEN 00:21:33

Well, I think a little bit of both, honestly. So I do play piano and I do have some piano students and that is less risky than singing because again, in speaking, we start and we stop, it's not this synchronized act like singing is. So, I had piano students where they—we would just wear masks and it was pretty chill, not—didn't feel as high anxiety. I think instrumental teachers and instrumentalists in general, right now do have a little more flexibility. Again, you can—you don't have to worry about the aerosols building up quite as quick, although you do want to still ventilate and [wear] masks in every rehearsal; we have studies to back that up as well, because of the studies that were commissioned. I think it's at Colorado University or University of Boulder at Colorado?, I think they both did a study and they're slightly different. But they did an instrument study too and again, they still produce aerosols. So, I think the only musicians right now who really can just go at it freely are string players and rhythm section players, drums, guitar, bass, they're not—they're not doing anything from here at all (*motions to mouth*). So I think they have more flexibility in what they're able to do and where they're able to gather. It's just [that] singing—even even in a building, even with masks, you're supposed to air it out every 30 minutes or so, because again, the masks are not foolproof, right? So unless everyone's wearing N95s, and at that point, you can't—you can't really sing because that's kind of the balance of it, right? And, I will say, especially as a teacher too, I

can sing in a mask pretty unencumbered, because I've been singing for 20 years, but trying to teach a student, while they're also wearing a mask obviously completely changes their awareness of their instrument. And they're trying to build their technique, they don't have an established technique like a professional would. So again, there's kind of all these different variables, just from the virtue of what our instrument is versus an instrument outside of our body. So I think if I was more—if I was a piano teacher, I might have been a little more flexible in what we do. But again, not really, because I'm primarily a vocalist, and it was still a huge risk to me. I think in general, they have more flexibility. But I think me personally, I think I probably would have been just about the same, as cautious again, because it's—I can't take any risks if I want to still be a singer.

MARIA 00:24:03

Yeah. And then, you were talking about how, despite this pandemic, you were still able to gain some online students. Now, you don't have to mention this (*pause*) company that you worked for. Or I could certainly cut it out. But, I am a little interested to hear if you don't mind, what it was like working for this company, and some of their practices versus your own, let's say independent studio of online students. Can you talk a little bit about that?

KRISTEN 00:24:44

Yes, because that's part of the reason I quit. So basically, when this all went down, our boss—again, I don't know if she'll—she won't ever see this because she's not really a musician. She's one of those music academy owners who's in it for the money and in it for the expansion and in it to monopolize the area on music lessons. The marketing is based on nothing. She claims she's Washington's number one music school, she just made that up. She's been open for three years (*laugh*). But anyway, I don't want to—I can say so many things about this company and my time working there. Over four years, I want to—over like, almost the course of four years. But, just in terms of COVID, it kind of all came to a head because we had been challenged by exploitative labor practices at this place. And that's a huge issue in the music industry anyway, especially in music education, sometimes. These private kinds of business models, again, want quantity over quality in their teaching. They just try to get as many students as possible and don't really care about the results. And it's just—that's not how I exist or teach. So we had been, as a staff, sustaining exploitative labor practices, broken labor laws, unreasonable hours, no breaks, stuff like that anyway. And then, when COVID happened, abruptly, we all got switched online. And at first it was—we had to report to work and we got little tablets, and then the students would be online in their home. But we were all still in our separate rooms. I pointed out that either way, if I am a singer in that room, I'm still singing in that room. And with an HVAC system, actually, the particles can go room to room. This was one of those places [where] it looks like any college hallway where the practice rooms are, where it's just little boxes of rooms, right next to each other, they're getting really stuffy, really fast, ventilation is horrible. And the HVAC is—it was one of those buildings where it was never the right temperature, it was either freezing or hot. And then—or the rooms were hot. And then the hallway was freezing. Again, there was just no—the ventilation was awful in that building and I knew that. I basically just pointed out [that] we're not going far enough with these precautions. Nobody should be in that building making music, honestly, because the rooms themselves were—oh my god, eight feet? We couldn't even—how would you teach a distanced lesson? You'd literally have each person in a corner and you can't move. It just wasn't, in my opinion, practical. And I kind of wrote this essay (*laugh*) about citing all this—these studies about how you can still have it [COVID] transfer in the HVAC systems. And at the very least, we should be putting air purifiers in every room. Spoiler alert, after I left guess what ended up in those rooms? (*laugh*) I heard after. I was like, oh okay, imagine that. So I said we needed air purifiers, we needed to space out lessons, because again, that was part of the issue. We'd have back to back to back to back lessons. So again, even though the instructors were in the room, if they started allowing—so it was just singers and wind instruments they weren't having come in, I should clarify. They still wanted piano and other—like rhythm section guitar, they have a lot of guitar and piano and drum students so that—they mostly cater to that. At first they said masks were optional before [Jay] Inslee put the mandate [in effect]. And again, this is when I wrote this essay. So they—from their perspective, they were like, 'Masks are going to be optional. And then we'll just have everybody—voice and winds will be

online, but you'll still be in your room.' And then I was still expected to teach whatever piano students who wanted to come in, in the room. And I—again, I just was like, these rooms are literally just too small to do this in general. Curiously, another chain of a more locally owned music business, which has been more established and seems more equitable and more ethical—they did not do lessons in person in phase two, because they weren't allowed to. I didn't believe the company I worked for was allowed to either, according to the state guidelines. So, a couple of us actually danced around and thought about reporting. But again, we didn't because you're so exploited by these places that it's like, you need that job. So how much are you going to fight? Long story short, I wrote an essay about how I didn't think the precautions were going far enough and how I wanted to teach from home and keep my schedule. She [the studio owner] basically said—to the voice teachers specifically, because it wasn't just me because we were all like this is not going to work. She basically said that—she leveraged her jobs against us and said, 'Well, we'll keep you—keep the schedule, but we won't give you any new students if they want to—if they ever want to come back in person [lessons]. And then you know, when in person [instruction] comes again, we're just gonna take the students away from you.' So it was literally just like—or she also said, 'We might not have a studio for you when you want to come back.' So, leveraging our job against us. So, I decided to quit and try my own business for once. I think it worked out much—for the better because again, I had control over all those precautions. I was able to actually keep myself and my students safe. Again, this [music academy] is one of those places where you're—[as] a music teacher, you're not allowed to talk to your students outside of the context of the building. We're not allowed—I didn't have their emails, I didn't have their phone numbers, I couldn't communicate with my students outside the context of their thirty minute or an hour lesson at all. Especially during this time where communication is of the utmost importance and sticking to these guidelines and being honest about it; I just couldn't mentally deal with it. I just thought it was really gross how, again, she literally (*laugh*) hadn't talked to us in two months. And then as soon as we entered phase two, it was—we got an email: 'Oh, I'm so excited. Are you guys all ready to come back?' And we were all like, 'No, like, there's a raging pandemic.' So anyway, yeah. I have a lot of things to say. Again, it was just kind of this steady buildup of exploitative labor practices, unjust students schedules, and then COVID hit. I think a lot of companies, not even just the one I'm talking about, but companies in other industries showed their true colors, that they don't really care about what happens to their students or their teachers, and they just want to keep making money, which again, I guess is fine, if that's what you care about, but, I just couldn't do it anymore. So, I wrote that essay, cited all the things that the studies I had believed—that showed that that building was not safe. And the way we were doing it, again, especially because at this time, she had said masks were going to be optional. I was like "You cannot have people in that building (*laugh*), in a six foot room. Are you kidding me?" So anyway, that's my answer to that question (*laugh*). Again, I could talk about my experiences there for a really long time.

MARIA 00:31:41

Yeah. Well, I'm also wondering if you can clarify, was this position you were working—was it an employee position? Or was it an independent contractor position?

KRISTEN 00:31:53

Employee. So it was kind of a—really interesting, because we were paid employees, but we only—we got paid kind of like contractors, because they were taking monthly tuition. But, then we were getting paid hourly. So even though they were taking [in] the same amount of money every month, we weren't getting paid the same amount of money every month. (*off camera noise*) So interesting model, right? Yeah, so I was an employee receiving a W-2 [tax form].

MARIA 00:32:27

And, as an employee, did you receive any benefits, like paid time off or health insurance? Or was this a part-time job?

KRISTEN 00:32:36

So, the amount of students you'd have to have to make full-time [employment status] is way too many. So, none of us were really full-time even though I was there Monday through Friday, I was teaching a solid five, six, seven hours a day. Yeah. I'm sorry, can you repeat the question one more time?

MARIA 00:32:59

Did you have any health insurance or any paid time off?

KRISTEN 00:33:03

Right, I was gonna say paid time off. Yes, in the state of Washington, we are guaranteed sick pay. But we weren't even allowed to call out. I worked there for almost four years, and I was not allowed to call out sick. I tried several times. And I was told no, that I had to come in. So, even though we had sick pay, mandated by the state of Washington—this is one of the things I would have used against her should she—should—if anything happened gone, going further. But, yeah, we were never allowed to use the sick time that we even had, which again, in times of COVID, is just a reflection on how seriously they're going to take your health and how seriously they're going to take their students' health. And a—in terms of benefits of paid vacation (*makes exasperated sound*), there were four breaks during the year that we would take, because she based it on a forty-eight week calendar week. They were just when her family likes to take vacation, and we wouldn't get paid for them [the breaks]. So we would just be forced to take a week off in July and then two weeks off in December, and just miss out on money. Because those are—that's how it works. So, like I said, even though she's—they were taking the same amount of money for you having those students on your schedule, we were getting paid hourly. So when there were breaks in the schedule, they would take in the same amount of money that month and pay us out all less. So anyway. Lots of things to say about that place (*laugh*). Annie Wright Schools is fabulous though, I'll just say that. They're wonderful. The other place—(*sighs deeply*).

MARIA 00:34:35

And, so let's say if you did have—if you were sick, and you called in, you said they would say 'No, come in anyway'.

KRISTEN 00:34:43

Yes.

MARIA 00:34:44

What would happen if you had just stayed home?

KRISTEN 00:34:48

I don't know. Because I mean, to be honest, I think she realized my students liked me too much and I had too much power to—for her to actually try to fire me. But you would have heard about it and you would have been pressured. I—one of the admin who worked there—who formerly worked there—was so stressed out by the amount of pressure this boss put on her constantly. She developed autoimmune issues, basically. This is—probably, maybe needs to be edited out. But there is a teacher with cancer there that had trouble getting time off. That's how bad it is. This boss literally would not let you take time off if you had cancer. And supposedly, allegedly, her [the employee's] oncologist had to call this boss and be like, 'May I remind you of the labor laws in Washington?' and 'You were supposed to give this person time off for having cancer.' [MARIA: So like,] Yeah, it's this—I wish I had better things to say. But it literally was like—and again, this is my experience over three years prior to COVID. So, I knew they're not going to take it seriously in times of COVID, either. And again, once the mask mandate happened, they did wear their masks, they bought their air purifiers, they put on a really good show. But yeah, I didn't believe it went far enough. And I didn't believe that this company or this person had our best interests in mind. So yeah, it was that bad.

MARIA 00:36:13

Yeah, one last question. And then I want to transition into more of your own independent studio. But about this previous job, how would you say the income or the wages you were receiving compared to, let's say the rates that you charge for your private students now?

KRISTEN 00:36:35

Well—they [the owners of the music academy] were taking—we were getting less than half of what they were taking. And they were claiming that we were world class faculty. And they were claiming that we are all highly-skilled professionals, which again, some of us were. I have a Master's degree, I can say that about myself. I should be—they should be charging what they're charging for someone like me to teach them [the students]. However, there was—her [the owner's] little sister taught piano and she was seventeen years old. There are teachers there who do not have degrees in music—again, I don't want to be elitist about it. That doesn't say everything about a musician, obviously, it's not just about a degree. But, if you're sitting here putting world class faculty on your website, they should all be world class, you should be able to back it up. She would basically just hire anyone with musical experience in any kind. And again, all the rates were the same. There were no raises, there was—it seemed really arbitrary. The amount of money people were getting paid [was] based on favoritism, honestly. I actually—again, this goes so—this goes so deep Maria. I found out one of my coworkers at the time, who is Black, was making \$1 less than me and she had the exact same qualifications as me, down to the Masters, down to the amount of years we had both been teaching when we got hired. So it was completely just whatever this woman wanted to pay you in that moment in your interview. And then it was that rate for the entire time. And, they've actually lowered it since I've left because I've heard through the grapevine. And they're starting teachers, even less now, when they're taking in \$66—they take \$133 a month, from ever—they auto bill, and it's really hard to get out of the auto bill. Also, many parents have complained about that. Their cancellation policy and makeup policies are wack. They're literally like—they don't offer makeups, basically. So they take your \$133 every month, and then they offer [that] if you miss a lesson, you get a (*makes quotations with fingers*) free Saturday makeup bonus class at 9:00, 10:00am in the morning Saturday, everyone's favorite time for music lessons (*sarcastically*). And it was a group lesson. So, you're not actually getting what you [the parent and client] had paid for in the first place. Also, we as teachers were never prepared for those group lessons, because we didn't know who signed up until two days before. And it wasn't according to level. So, you could get a group lesson with a four year old, an adult and a thirteen year old. Two days before: go, what do you do? And it wasn't even guaranteed because again, this model sucks. If they even would show up. So, even if you would plan for a lesson such as that, it all goes out the window as soon as you're there. And sometimes you would drive there, and no one would show up anyway. And you just have to drive home. And we formerly were not getting paid (*claps hands for emphasis*) for that for two years. We did not get paid for Saturdays. So I'm just—put it on the record, I don't care. She can come find me in Massachusetts because the amount of labor laws this person broke, and [which] they're continually expanding in this state is really appalling. And they're [the owners are] going to run out of musicians eventually, because a lot of us who have worked there and are not working there anymore, are not saying nice things about them, obviously. Here I am on record saying it. They're eventually going to run out of qualified people to teach at this place, because they've expanded so fast and basically burned bridges with a lot of the area teachers. And the way they—they let go of people too is really harsh and it's just all bad. It's just literally I just have—I have no (*laugh*) I have like—this rabbit hole goes so deep, and I could just keep going too. It's just—it was just really bad honestly. And they messed up a lot of things that I think don't—(*sigh*) I don't think a for-profit business is the best model for music education.

MARIA 00:40:22

So, before we talk about what you're doing now, do you have any final thoughts about that company that you worked for?

KRISTEN 00:40:39

Other than I hope that their business fails, honestly? Because again, they either need to buck up and pay their teachers what they're worth, and let them have breaks and adhere to the Washington labor laws and guidelines regarding sick pay. Or they don't deserve—they don't deserve it. Again, it's just—it's literally—it's exploitation of teachers, it's exploitation of parents and students, because again, they're not getting the top notch instruction that they're paying for and they're not getting makeup lessons. They're not—they get trophies and recitals. That's their goal. They get—they get arbitrary trophies where it's not even by achievement, but it's how long you've been paying them, basically. There were times where I'd have a student not show up for two, three months, literally. They would—they would keep charging people until you sent the cancellation form. And I wouldn't—they wouldn't show up. And I would just—I would expect that. And then whenever they would appear, I'd be shocked. So again, that doesn't bode well for teaching either. Because again, it just always—you're just constantly underprepared for whatever is being thrown your way. There were times where this—a kid would be missing for two months, and then they come back on the day that they haven't been there in so long, and they get a trophy for being absent for two months. Because again, it's just the amount of time that you've been paying for them. It's not actually based on any progress or progress report or recommendation from the teacher. It's literally every three months you give the children a trophy. And that's why they stay. But I am—I think a lot of musicians young in their career, especially teaching ones, have worked at places like this. Unfortunately, these exist all over the country. It's not just in Washington. I have had experiences in a Massachusetts one as well. But I gotta say this Washington one made my old boss in Massachusetts look like a saint in comparison to the amount of things we endured as [we were] just trying to be good music teachers. So yeah, anyway, I didn't think this—it's so funny that this conversation turned into— let's tell all about Cappella and how (*laugh*) they're this [type of] company. But yeah, we'll see what happens. Like I said, I think eventually, they're going to realize they expanded too quickly. And they're going to run out of teachers to teach the students because they're burning all the bridges with the professional musicians of the area. And Seattle has a pretty decent sized market. But is it enormous? No, it's really not. I know most of the singers who sing there, and none of them want to teach there. So we'll see what they get in the future.

MARIA 00:43:19

Yeah. I feel like we could (*laugh*) talk about this one company forever. But I'll move on a little bit and kind of wrap up a bit here. Now I'm wondering if you could tell me—you're back in Massachusetts. So, can you tell me a little bit about why you moved back to Massachusetts, what you're doing for work now, and talk a little bit about that transition?

KRISTEN 00:43:48

Yeah. So I mean, part of the reason I moved back to Massachusetts was because I fell in love. But most—a lot of the reason too was—I mean, my living situation wasn't great in Washington. [In] Washington, as we all know, housing prices, even during this pandemic, are still going up. The retail boom in that area between Seattle and Tacoma is huge. And again, a lot of working class people are getting priced out of those two cities because people from other states or people from Seattle are moving down to Tacoma and the prices are just going up, up, up, up and my living situation wasn't fantastic. It was hampering my creative ability and my ability to do work also. So, I moved because I was hoping to get a better living situation and kind of be closer to support networks. And to be quite frank again, Seattle's music area is wonderful. There's a lot of really wonderful things happening there. But, the truth of the matter is Boston is a larger market. I went to undergrad and graduate school in the Boston area, so I still have a lot of my networking and colleagues [there]. I've been asked a couple of times to teach at a couple of places as soon as I got back and I was like, "Nah, I'm doing my own thing now, thank you." But yeah, so, I was just really wanting to get back to a more familiar place during this kind of turmoil and hopefully expand my career in a place that I believe has a little bit more opportunity. And again, that's not a knock on Seattle. I love everybody I met there and I'm so thankful for the things that I experienced there. But I just kind of missed some of the—especially the academics of Boston. I mean, a lot of the conferences are in Boston, there's so many conservatories and music schools there. So, if you ever want to check out a free recital, they're all over the place. So, I just kind of wanted a closer access point to a lot of the things especially in the voice world. And again, there are wonderful

voice professionals over in the Seattle area too, and I'm so thankful I met them and got to, you know, pick their brains for all their knowledge. But I wanted to get back home, I think. And I also just love Boston, I do. And Dunkin Donuts (*laugh*). I do still have \$25 on my Starbucks card though. I got—I gotta go find a Starbucks and then (*laugh*) and then go there. I mean a little bit of homesickness, a little bit of love, and a little bit of I think it's a better career move. And so far—that has honestly been proven true even in the short time that I've been here. And considering the current situation, I've had—like I said, I had a couple of people reach out to me at different points saying, 'Hey, if you ever want to teach in my studio, you have a job.' I also had a colleague from Longy [Longy School of Music of Bard College] reach out and mention that the place he teaches, Lasell University, needs a choir director for their non-major choir. I don't know what's happening with that yet at all. So I don't even know that—they could have already picked somebody else that isn't me. But there's a lot of things going on here. As for me, I've just been teaching online fully, I was able to have—I was able to pick up some students who still lived in Washington, and I market myself on Instagram, Twitter, of all places, although not as much on Twitter because my Twitter is kind of just a political trash bin. But, I've actually found some students there, believe it or not, some on Instagram, too. I just kind of—I don't know, I just put out vibes into the world and if people think they want to work for me, they—work with me, they find their way. I actually have a girl in India, right now, who wants to study with me, she came across my YouTube videos on Reddit of all places. So I've just kind of been finding students in all corners of the world, really, I have a dude in Toronto, I have—somebody in Hawaii right now, I have a student who was inquiring from Switzerland as well. So it's kind of opened up this global market of teaching, which is awesome. But again, [it] also kind of presents some challenges. Now we have to market ourselves online. Now, we have to buy all this equipment and whatnot, right? And now we have to figure out how to teach in a more, ZOOM-friendly format. We can't play live, so that's the biggest knock on ZOOM lesson[s] is I can't play the piano at the same time as my student is singing because it cancels it [the audio] out. There are some platforms that allow that to not happen. But again, it's imperative that the student also have that level of equipment. And, with the current economy, a lot of my students are on iPads and iPhones and tablets, some of their WiFis are still awful, so there's only so much they can do. But yeah, so we ZOOM, and I can't play the piano at the same time, so I've kind of adapted my teaching style a little bit. And in some ways, it's been good because again, especially in contrast to doing in person lessons right now with masks (*covers mouth*), I can't see their mouth, I can't see their technique. It muffles the overtones just a little bit, so you can't really get the full spectrum of their sounds and again it's—so with online, I can see their face, it's right there. It's closer actually, than sometimes it would even be in the room. And actually, as much as I like playing the piano and being able to accompany my students and make music together, it's been good too, because they're not—I'm not distracted by trying to play the accompaniment, and they're not just completely depending on the notes that I'm spoon feeding them. So, it's been really good for ear training, honestly. A lot of students have had to get used to singing a capella, or a call and response kind of format is kind of how I usually do it. I sing the thing, they sing the thing and then we just kind of have a flow like that. But yeah, so, I've been really enjoying being my own boss and being able to set my own (*laugh*) expectations and adhere to the labor laws as they should be. And, I also have a colleague of mine who also used to work at this wonderful company. And, she kind of quit in kind of the same—not for the same reasons. But when you quit there, they also rip all your students off your schedule, because they're afraid of you stealing them. And it's very traumatic for the students. One of my last—one of the days that I—I'd given my notice, and—and I gave a thirty day notice, I gave a month's notice, again, so that they wouldn't have to do something like that. And again, my colleague did this too. She also gave a month's notice. And the next day, they ripped all my—as many students as they could off my schedule. So they [the students] didn't even get to say "bye" to me in some cases. I didn't get to say "bye" to them. One of the days—one of my students I had been with for like two years at that point, a very wonderful, sensitive little girl. She started crying because I had to—I—the way it was, it was just like our Google Calendar—we would just see what was on our Google Calendar. And, I noticed that she wasn't on my schedule next week. And I had to—I was going to—I couldn't just not say anything. So I said, "Hey, I just noticed that, unfortunately, it looks like you're moving to another teacher next week." And, she just started bawling. And in—the mom, of course, got really upset too. So again, they're—this company is leaving a lot of bad taste in people's mouths as they continue the exploitation of both of their teachers and their students. And, it's just my goal

to not do things like that. I teach in a kind of compassionate, holistic, empathetic way. And, I try my best to do that with a screen connection, too. So yeah, it's been actually really nice. I quite enjoy working from home. I mean, it's not awesome being, as isolated, but I love not driving anywhere. I love the ease of like, "Oh, I got to be at work in two minutes. Let me go grab a snack real fast in my house." It's in—and like I said, [it's] the fact that you—you can open yourself up to this global market now. And I think people have realized, again, although online lessons are different, they're not worse. You can see—I have—my students are still making wonderful progress. I do online lessons with my teacher sometimes who's still in Washington. And yeah, it's just been really interesting. I'm kind of glad in some ways that the pandemic happened. I mean, not—I'm not, but I don't know if I would have quit, when I did, if this wasn't happening. I think I would have put up with those conditions longer. And I think—I wanted to quit, but COVID kind of just gave me a[n] easy exit time. It—everybody's been in transition, so it kind of gave me the perfect opportunity to launch this [independent lesson studio]. When I moved, like I said, my colleague—I'm also teaching for her under the umbrella of her studio, and I have a couple students through that. And then mostly I've been, like I said, finding them on Facebook and Instagram and Reddit of all places, or they just kind of—I have a YouTube where I put up some instructional videos for free. So, if anyone comes across them, and they like the way I teach, they can contact me there. And I've had—again, this is kind of interesting, I have people kind of coming from different parts of the world, which is a challenging thing for scheduling, with all these time zones floating around in my head. But, other than that, it's been—it's been great, honestly. I'm really enjoying it, especially in contrast to the conditions I know I would have been submitted to, if I stayed at those places. Again, Annie—the other school I worked for, which is a K through [grade] twelve private school, they were wonderful. They basically said, we know there's no safe way to do this, unfortunately. And, because you know, it's an older—it's one of those wonderful, brick old schools where they have those funny shaped rooms and everything is just very architectural. So, they didn't have the ventilation or the space for private music lessons and the pods that they had to do, they just knew it wouldn't work. So they were like, 'Hey, we're going to give everyone your contact information. We're just going to kind of cut the program for this year. Unfortunately, it's just too complicated with the scheduling and then the room assignments, and we wish you the best.' I don't think I was—I don't know if I was ever officially fired, to be honest, because again, it was kind of just like the program was put on pause. I assume after COVID, I don't know, maybe they know I moved to Massachusetts. I didn't say anything, so maybe I should send them an email and be like, (*mimes typing*) "Just so you know, I don't know if you're going to start this program again, but I live in a different place now." But yeah, it was kind of just like they transitioned to online and we finished out whatever lessons we had with students for ones that did want to stay online. Some parents ended up just not completing their packages that they had already gotten. And, then as soon as the summer hit, it—we were on our own and they were like, 'You can just take them with your studio. You can charge them whatever you want. You're just—you're completely—even though you've got them from us, they're yours.' Because they just understood the logistical challenge that this is. So they're [Annie Wright Schools] wonderful. They're a wonderful school system, I have nothing but good things to say about them. But, it was just unfortunate that I had such a good employer and then such a bad one at the same time. And, it just kind of worked out that I was able to quit one and then one made the difficult choice. Then, here I am, teaching all by my lonesome now, and I'm scared of filing my taxes, but we'll figure it out. We'll get it together (*laugh*).

MARIA 00: 55:35

Yeah. And your colleague that you mentioned, who also worked there [at Cappella Music Academy], actually she's agreed to do an interview with me as well.

KRISTEN 00:55:42

Oh, awesome. I wonder—you might be able to get some insight off of her. But it was—that place (*off camera sounds*) Again, and COVID just kind of brought everything to a head where you're like—okay, not that anything else before that was tolerable, but it just really revealed what employers would be willing to do in times of distress, and it's just [that] a lot of employers did not pass the test, it seems.

MARIA 00:56:11

Yeah, so, I want to be respectful of your time and, and kind of start to wrap things up. So thank you for sharing all your thoughts. And I'm wondering, just— as we're finishing up here, do you have any final thoughts to add about different work environments, about the pandemic, about your teaching now? Or any final thoughts you'd like to add?

KRISTEN 00:56:40

Yeah, I mean, I think—again, I think, is it a good [thing] that the pandemic happened? No, but I think it's a really interesting time to be a musician. It's a heartbreaking and difficult time to be a musician, but I think it's kind of opened doors that we wouldn't—we weren't really seeing before, especially in the classical world where we're so, so—I mean, we're still stuck in the 1800s in the classical world to be honest. We're still doing repertoire from the 1800s. We're still doing it very much in the same way that we always used to be, right?, like an orchestra on stage, a nice—nicely dressed, quiet audience, right? So, I think, especially in the classical world, we're kind of being forced to market ourselves in a more modern way and present in—not prevent but present classical music to new audiences and new ways that maybe they weren't familiar with before, because of the prohibitive cost of classical music, to be honest. That's a whole other discussion is classism and classical music, right? But, yeah, so I think—it's hard though, because again, now we're doing all those things for less payoff, literally and figuratively, right? We don't get those live audiences when we're just putting up an Instagram performance, right? And we don't get compensation for that. But in some ways, it's cool that now we're kind of put into this format, where we can do different things with classical music and present it in different ways that maybe we haven't thought of before. And maybe it's time to think of doing things that way. I mean, that's a whole conversation in itself, how—especially when you think about opera versus musical theater. Musical theater is always coming out with new musicals, they're always changing up their new characters. They just had a non-binary character, although they took it away on Broadway and that's a whole thing too (*laugh*). But anyway, there's literally—they did a *Ratatouille* musical on Tik Tok (*laugh*). And we're over here being like, "What do we do?" It's—I think it's time that classical music kind of has a reckoning, and figures out how to be part of modern culture, to be quite honest. So I think there's a really exciting opportunity. There's also been so many educational opportunities too. I have come across so many free or reduced or donation-based workshops. I just did two this weekend. I did a workshop on mix—mixing and belting with this wonderful Canadian singer, and I think he works at a university too. And, then I did a vocology workshop this weekend. Again, it was something being advertised on Instagram, and they set up a ZOOM. So all these different grassroots organizations for music have been popping up because I think people realize, ok, [that] the people who run this industry, the theaters, the gatekeepers at the top, the music academy employers, we don't have to be under their umbrella. We can make our own opportunities. And I think that's kind of the best thing about this awful situation. But I mean, I would love for singing to come back soon, though, if we could all get vaccinated. Let's all do that, so that your singers can go back into concert halls without fear. Yeah, so I think it's just a—it's an interesting time to be a musician and of course, there's all this opportunity. But is it harder to want to do those things? Yeah, because we're missing that live feedback of that audience. We're missing that sparkle in our creativity. I mean, it's been harder for me to practice, I know that. It's harder for me to plan and want to do repertoire. And I think a lot of musicians are kind of feeling that way. But again, on the same side of that coin is, now we're all kind of in this transition where we have to figure out, how do we market ourselves in a new way? Or—or should I explore new genres? There's just so many things that we're kind of presented with right now.

MARIA 01:00:37

Yeah, for sure. Well, thank you so much, Kristin, I think that'll do it and I will stop our recording here.